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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000363

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2015

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL BA

SUBJECT: WEBSITE ADMINISTRATORS REFUSE BAIL OFFER, REMAIN  
IN DETENTION

REF: MANAMA 281

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) In a meeting with the public prosecutor March 13, three Internet website administrators who were detained two weeks ago rejected a bail offer and chose to remain in jail until their next hearing in 15 days. Following the meeting, the detainees' supporters gathered for a protest and vowed to demonstrate weekly until the three are released. The detainees began a hunger strike on March 12 but ended it a day later when they were moved to a different jail. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs / Information Minister Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador that the three had broken the law and the case was now properly in the courts.

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Internet administrators detained, begin hunger strike  
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¶2. (SBU) In a meeting with the public prosecutor March 13, Ali Abdul Imam, Sayed Mohammed Al Mousawi, and Hussein Yousef, who were arrested in late February and charged with incitement against the government and spreading false rumors, rejected an offer to be released on bail and will remain in jail. The public prosecutor offered to release each of the three administrators of the Bahrain On-Line website on BD 1000 (USD 2700) bail on the condition that they remain in the country. The administrators, whose next hearing is in 15 days, said they are innocent and will remain in custody until they are freed without charge. Following the meeting, approximately 50 of the detainees' supporters gathered for a protest. Borrowing the U.S. color-coded threat categories, demonstrators wore orange to signify a "high" level of threat against freedom of expression in Bahrain. Some of the protesters chained themselves together and held signs and broken computer keyboards. They vowed to demonstrate weekly until the detainees are released.

¶3. (C) All three detainees, who were being held at the Hoora Police Station, began a hunger strike March 12 to demand safer, more sanitary cells and pens and paper to write letters to their families. The sister of one of the detainees told EmbOff that the three were being held in a cell with drug addicts and other criminals. On March 13, they were moved to the Dry Dock Prison, where standards are reputably higher, and ended their hunger strike.

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Campaign of support for the detainees  
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¶4. (SBU) Shi'a religious leaders spoke out in support of the detainees, and some of their statements were posted on Bahrain On-Line. In his March 4 Friday sermon, prominent Shi'a cleric Sheikh Issa Qassem urged the GOB to release the detainees and commented that the media must be clean, objective and constructive in its criticisms of the government. Shi'a Sheikh Mohamed Ali Al Mahfood called the arrest an insult to reforms and accused the GOB of subjectively implementing the law. Several political societies and civil society organizations have also called for the detainees' release.

¶5. (SBU) Other supporters both inside and outside of Bahrain regularly contribute to a website dedicated to the release of the detainees (<http://freealib.blogspot.com>). The website includes links to articles on the case as well as links to other websites that support the detainees. Reporters Without Borders called for the release of the detainees and said the November 2002 press law should be changed. According to the group's website, the press law guarantees the right to "express one's opinion and to disseminate it orally or in writing," but deems anything "against the Islamic faith, the unity of the people, and the person of the King" and "inciting sectarianism" punishable by six months to five years in prison.

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King pledges support for freedom of the press  
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16. (C) The press reported March 8 that the King met with board members of the Bahrain Journalists Association and pledged to protect freedom of the press. He said that loyalty to the country, however, should always come first. This has become a common refrain of the royal family and government in dealing with perceived challenges, and was most recently used in reaction to perceived Iranian meddling in Bahrain's Ashura celebrations.

17. (C) The Ambassador discussed the issue and the concern it was generating with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs/Minister of Information Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar March 19. Abdul Ghaffar said the case was not an issue for him -- the suspects had broken the law and the case was now in the courts. In his personal view, he did not agree with the decision to keep the suspects in jail for such a long period of time pending trial and said that three days would have been sufficient to gather evidence.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The next hearing in the case comes just days before Bahrain hosts the Formula One races April 1-3. The GOB's sensitivities about how the many visitors and journalists in town for the race perceive the Kingdom could influence how this case plays out.

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